# THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

121 114 politics and even religion cannot always avoid conforming to lines of ethnic cleavage too closely to prove wholly effective instruments of mutual understanding. Science, on the other hand, is absolutely disinterested in spirit. Its discoveries are for the whole world to enjoy. There can be no rivalry between the nations as regards their respective shares in the creation of knowledge except in so far as it takes the form of honourable competition in the training of sound scholars. The time is doubtless coming when more Egyptians will come forward as investigators duly educated in the critical use of evidence; and they will be welcome.

121 After all, it is hard to say whether the Egyptians themselves or the rest of the world have more to gain from the study of the age-long history of Egypt and of the no less enduring individuality of ●133 its people. The country is self-contained enough, thanks to the geographical barriers that shut in the Nile Valley, to maintain a civilization answering to its own needs. Even physically the 144 Egyptian type breeds true to itself. As often as racial intermixture occurs, the foreign strain would seem to become recessive to the point of extinction. On the other hand, Egypt is situated at the 131 meeting-point of three continents. It presides over the junction 174 of the Western and Eastern water-ways of the Old World. How far its influence has extended, whether by direct or by indirect propagation, at various critical periods of history is a problem, much discussed at the present moment, on which the most distant regions may be able to throw light. Any diffusion of culture, however, tends to fade out toward its circumference, and is only to be fully understood by intensive study at the centre. In the case of Egypt it is possible to grasp the complex nature of the 175 centrifugal force thence set in motion all the more thoroughly because there is literary as well as material evidence at the disposal of the archæologist. Silent monuments, too, often form the only yield of the spade. Even pictures speak at best in riddles. Literature, however, when it came into existence in Egypt or in Mesopotamia could in some measure disclose that ethnic psychology which alone is the key to genuine history.

181 538 Nevertheless, the psychic life of a people is but partially and imperfectly reflected in its literature. Just as in the individual the unconscious part of the mind may be supremely determinative of the total character, so in a community the non-literary and

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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Upper Egypt

# THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

## CHAPTER I

### EGYPTIAN VILLAGES AND THEIR INHABITANTS

THE natural barriers of Egypt (Fig. 1) have enabled the inhabitants, particularly those of the upper country, to live in comparative isolation throughout the whole of their history. On the north side lies the sea, along the east and west sides stretch vast, almost waterless deserts, while to the south ingress by way of the Nile is impeded by a series of cataracts. Their geographical isolation has doubtless been responsible for the characteristic conservatism of the Egyptian peasants. This conservatism is particularly apparent in their religious and social customs and their commoner industries, which, as will be more especially seen in the final chapter, have remained almost, if not entirely, unchanged from Pharaonic times.

The vast solitudes of the deserts are terrifying to the country folk, most of whom, up to the present day, cannot be induced to traverse even the lower fringes of those wastes after sunset (see Fig. 2). Fear of hyenas, and, still more, fear of *'afārīt*,[1] forbids any man to venture beyond the cultivation at night. The ordinary peasant, unless he is obliged to remain in the fields either to protect his crops or to watch over his sheep and goats, returns to his village before sunset, remaining there until just before the dawn of the following day.

The deserts have proved themselves valuable defences against invasion, the peoples who conquered the country at different periods of its history having usually entered it from the north-east. These invaders do not seem to have left any very marked impression on the physical aspect of the Upper Egyptians at any rate; most of these still bear a striking facial resemblance to the ancient inhabitants of the land whom we see depicted on the walls of the temples and tomb-chapels and in the portrait-statues of the Old,

[1] See Chapter XIV.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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# THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

Middle, and New Kingdoms. What really is beginning to affect the racial purity of the Egyptians is the presence among them of the descendants of negro slaves, who have been imported in large numbers by the Arabs in comparatively recent times. Many of them are now settled in certain of the villages, where they have

FIG. 1. MAP OF EGYPT

married among themselves or with the *fellāḥīn*, the result being that the population of such villages is almost entirely composed of black, or half-black, people. So far as I have observed, this negroid element is particularly marked in the Fayūm and Beni Ṣuēf, and on the edge of the cultivation in Minia and Asyūṭ provinces, where large numbers of Arabs have been settled for several generations.

The influence of the deserts may be seen in Egyptian folk-tales,

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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## THE VILLAGES AND THEIR INHABITANTS

The influence of the deserts may be seen in Egyptian folk-tales, many of which tell of encounters there with *afārit* and other supernatural beings. Secret caves in "the mountain," as the people call the steep, sometimes almost precipitous ascent to the high-desert plateau, also enter into the adventures recounted by the village story-tellers; these 'caves' are, of course, the ancient rock-hewn tomb-chapels with which the outer face of "the mountain" is in some places honeycombed (see Fig. 3).

Egypt is a land of contrasts, the marked difference between the very fertile Nile Valley and the arid, waterless deserts on either

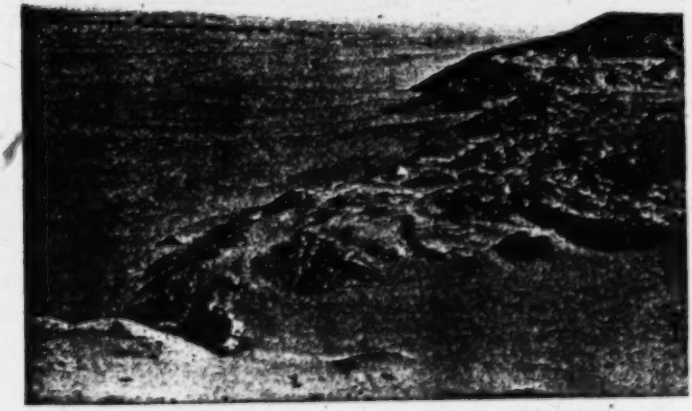

FIG. 2. EDGE OF THE HIGH-DESERT PLATEAU, THE LOWER DESERT, AND IN THE DISTANCE THE CULTIVATION

side of it striking the eye of every visitor to the country. These physical features are, I think, reflected in the character of the peasants, for it is a remarkable fact that the most divergent traits of character can be seen in a single individual. The Egyptian peasants, in spite of much poverty and sickness, and with few amusements to break the monotony of their lives, are as a whole a wonderfully cheerful and contented people. They are very quick of comprehension, of ready wit, dearly loving a joke, even if directed against themselves, usually blessed with a retentive memory, light-hearted, kindly, and very hospitable; they are also very hard-working. At the same time they are very emotional, highly strung, most inflammable, generally very ignorant, and nearly always conspicuously lacking in self-control.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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# THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

Thus a man normally of a quiet, gentle, and peaceful disposition may on the spur of the moment commit some brutal murder. One year when I was staying in a small, out-of-the-way village in Upper Egypt a man killed a neighbour in a terrible way because he had stolen some onions from his (the murderer's) field. The moment after he had committed the crime he was weeping over the body of his victim!

One of the besetting sins of the Egyptian *fellāḥīn* is jealousy, which often becomes such a raging passion that a jealous man or

FIG. 3. THE FACE OF "THE MOUNTAIN" AND ENTRANCES TO ANCIENT TOMB-CHAPELS

woman is rendered capable of committing any violent crime. The women are liable to be jealous of one another's children, the wives about their husbands, the men of each other's prosperity or position, and so on to an endless degree. I do not wish to imply that jealousy is uncommon in other parts of the world, but I certainly think that it has a large share in the general make-up of the Egyptian character.

Again, the love of money tends to make them very avaricious, and is the cause of many serious troubles among them. On the other hand, they are capable of, and often actually perform, most generous actions, both in the giving of money and in the forgiveness of an injury. Quarrels between individuals, occasionally very violent ones, are common in the villages, but if a judicious

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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peacemaker arrives in time a serious disturbance can usually be avoided.

The accounts given in subsequent chapters of blood-feuds, inter-village fights, and other crimes of violence should not, however, cause the reader to pass too harsh a judgment on the Egyptian peasants if he will but bear in mind that the violent contrasts in the physical features of the country are reflected in the psychology of the inhabitants collectively and individually.

The *felläḥīn* form the bulk of the population of Egypt, and the

FIG. 4. A VILLAGE ON THE BANKS OF THE BAHR EL-YŪSUF

larger number of them are Muslims. The Copts, who at one time were far more numerous than they are at the present day, are scattered about all over the country, though in a few towns and villages they may form the greater part of the population. The word 'Copt,' it must be borne in mind, does not denote a racial, but rather a religious, distinction.

The Beduins (Arabic *Bedu*, singular *Bedawī*), many of whom still lead a more or less nomadic desert life, and the Arabs, who have settled down as cultivators of the soil, also form a not inconsiderable portion of the population. Their facial features and certain styles of dress distinguish them from the native inhabitants. Nubians, Sudan negroes, Turks, Greeks, Syrians, and Jews are also to be found in large numbers, the four latter peoples chiefly in Lower Egypt, though they do not altogether confine themselves

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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563 to the northern part of the country. Europeans of various nationalities have for many years past settled in Egypt, most of them being engaged in business connected with the production and sale of cotton, sugar, and the like.

361 137 The villages of Egypt (see Fig. 4), as seen from the railway-carriage or from points of vantage in the cultivation, present a most picturesque appearance. They are generally surrounded with palm-groves, often very extensive, while palm-trees also grow actually among the houses, affording a welcome shelter from the

[343]

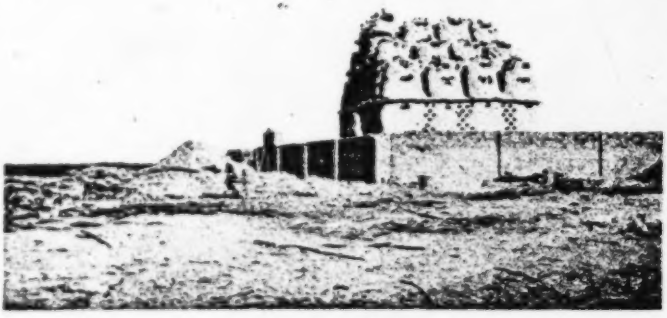

FIG. 5. A PIGEON-HOUSE

heat. These palm-girt villages are dotted about all over the cultivation, the brilliant green of which presents a startling con-
[133] trast to the immediately adjacent, and seemingly endless, desert. Sometimes a village encroaches right on to the edge of the desert, the upper slopes of which tower above it, forming a most romantic background. During the period of inundation the villages, which
[132] stand on a somewhat higher level than the surrounding cultivation, appear like palm-encircled islands in a vast inland sea, a geographical feature also remarked upon by Herodotus.[1]

343 231 Pigeon-houses (see Fig. 5) are prominent architectural features in a village. They are sometimes in the form of towers, with sloping, white-washed mud walls, surmounted by several layers of large pottery jars placed side by side in rows. Every jar has a hole in the base, for the ingress and egress of the pigeons. Some-

[1] ii. 97.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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sovereign, after that he was more than a hundred years old, became an object of envy to the favourites of the King and the puissant seigneurs of the Court of Memphis, on account of the great power which he wielded and the affection entertained for him by his monarch. They accordingly thus addressed the King: 'Great King, Joseph is now very old; his knowledge has diminished; his beauty has faded; his judgment is unsound; his sagacity has failed.'

"The King said: 'Set him a task which shall serve as a test'

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FIG. 13. A VIEW OF THE BAḤR EL-YŪSUF, WITH A SHĀDŪF AND WATER-WHEEL ON THE RIGHT

At that time el-Fayūm was called el-Hun, or 'the Marsh.' It served as a waste basin for the waters of Upper Egypt, which flowed in and out unrestrained. The courtiers, having taken council together what to propose to the King, gave this reply to Pharaoh: 'Lay the royal commands upon Joseph that he shall direct the water of the Nile from el-Hun and drain it, so as to give you a new province and an additional source of revenue.'

"The King assented, and, summoning Joseph to his presence, said: 'You know how dearly I love my daughter, and you see that the time has arrived in which I ought to carve an estate for her out of the crown lands, and give her a separate establishment,

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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my *barakeh*. I am happy to say that in both cases the performance was crowned with success!

I have already mentioned that the peasants appear to believe that ancient things are specially endowed with *barakeh*, and that on that account they may be efficacious in curing childless women of their barrenness. On the site of an ancient temple in Middle Egypt is a pool of water in which large inscribed stones are partly submerged, while others lie on the ground close by. The site is

FIG. 49. WOMEN PERAMBULATING THE POOL ON THE SITE OF AN ANCIENT TEMPLE

called *el-Kenīseh* (the Church) by the peasants, probably because it became known that it is the site of an ancient temple. This pool is believed to possess miraculous powers, and every Friday childless women flock thither from all the surrounding villages. They clamber over the stones on the edge of the pool and also over those which are partly submerged, performing this somewhat arduous feat three times, and going more or less in a circular direction (Fig. 49). After this they hope to conceive.

Curiously enough, women come to this spot and act in the same manner to prevent conception. On the occasion of my visit to the pool one of the women who was there told me that she had come for this latter purpose. She did not want to have another child for some time, as she had one or two very young children living

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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## DEATH AND FUNERARY CEREMONIES

The clothes which the man or woman wore when he or she died must be washed, and then a *fiḳīh* comes and recites passages from the Ḳorān, having the clothes close to him and one of his hands resting on them. He also recites over the place where the person died. If these precautions are not taken the *rōḥ* of the dead person cannot leave the house. When a child dies a hen is killed instead of an animal, the rest of the procedure being the same as on the occasion of the death of an older person.

I have given this information as it was repeated to me, but I

FIG. 51. STRING OF WAILING WOMEN IN A FUNERAL PROCESSION

fancy that it is really the *'afrīt* of the dead person that is meant in this statement, not the *rōḥ*, which is the soul, the *'afrīt* being the ghost, and quite separate from the *rōḥ*, according to the popular belief.[1]

The corpse is borne to the grave by four male bearers, who are constantly changed during the procession to the cemetery, for to assist in thus carrying the dead is considered a pious act, and he who performs it thereby acquires considerable merit. The funeral procession is headed by men, those who are relations walking as near as possible to the bier. Immediately behind the bier walk the female mourners (Fig. 51), their faces, hands, and arms dyed blue, and their heads, breasts, and arms plastered with mud; they hold handkerchiefs, usually blue or black, and sometimes green, which they wave in the air as they give vent to their piercing

[1] See below, pp. 237 ff.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt



ululations of grief. Among them are professional wailers, whose lamentations are the loudest of all.

It should be noted here that the wailing and general uproar made by women at a death is quite contrary to the teaching of the founder of Islām, and many men among the peasants in Egypt have often expressed to me their disapproval of the practice. As will be seen later, this custom is one of the many survivals from ancient times

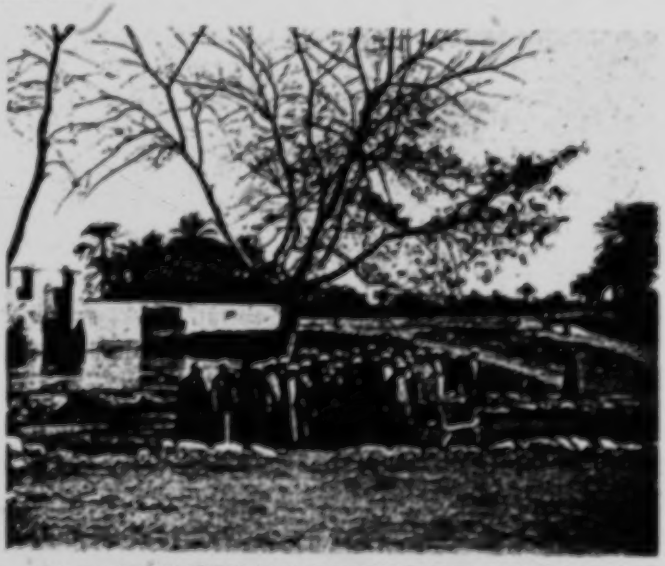

FIG. 52. THE HALT FOR PRAYER ON THE WAY TO THE CEMETERY

It is surprising for how long a time the women can keep up their wailing, which is pitched in a very high key. As a matter of fact, their throats are often so affected by the continuous uttering of these piercing cries that at the end of one day of mourning they can speak only in a whisper.

On its way to the grave the funeral procession halts at a specially chosen spot, and the bier is placed on the ground (Fig. 52). The men stand in rows, one behind the other, and assume a deeply reverential attitude, while a *fiḳīh* (plur. *fuḳahā*; see p. 172) recites passages from the Ḳorān, the assembled men often joining in. When these recitations are finished the bearers come forward and raise

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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792 During the sheikh ʿAbdu l-Laṭîf's lifetime he was visited on one occasion by the sheikh Sulimān, who resided in a village some miles distant. Wherever he went the sheikh Sulimān was always accompanied by his faithful servant. On the occasion of this visit [198] the two sheikhs conversed together in an unknown language. [158] This roused the curiosity of the sheikh Sulimān's servant, who after the interview asked his master what they had been talking about. The sheikh told him that ʿAbdu l-Laṭîf had remonstrated with him for coming to his village and had bade him remain in his own neighbourhood. Doubtless jealousy was at the root of this ill-feeling.

792 A few days later the servant noticed very early in the morning 785 that his master's fingers were all burned at the tips. He immediately questioned him as to the cause of this injury, and the sheikh told him that it was his custom to go every night to all the sheikhs' tombs in the neighbourhood and light candles for them, and that while he was engaged in this pious work his fingers were burned.

798 The sheikh Sulimān is now dead, but his piety is still remembered. 766 He is buried in his native village, but six other tombs are erected 769 to his memory in various parts of the country. Moreover, the inhabitants of his village hold a *mūlid* every year in his honour.

792 In one of the provinces in Upper Egypt, close to the desert hills, lived the sheikheh Ṣulūḥ. This woman had, during her lifetime, a great reputation for holiness, and people flocked to her, in times of difficulty, from all quarters. Her skin was very dark from constant exposure to the sun, and her head, on which she wore no veil, was covered with a crop of hair, thick and long like the wool of a sheep; from beneath her brows peered dark, sharp-looking eyes. Her clothes were scanty, consisting merely of a piece of linen rag and a sort of coat. She remained out in this desert solitude all day, and at night, so I was told, slept alone "in the mountain." As I have explained, the people call the often precipitous high-desert hills the mountain (*el-gebel*), so she probably [133] took shelter in one of the natural or artificial caves which exist in great numbers in the hillsides.

792 On one occasion, when a number of men and women had come 789 to consult her, one of the former asked her what had become of 685 his most valuable camel, which he had lost. The sheikheh at once told him the exact hour in which this loss had occurred, and in-

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt
COPTS MR10



cliff on which the monastery is built towers up above the canal, while behind the building, and outside its surrounding walls, lie two fairly large cemeteries, one Christian and the other Muslim. The present building stands on an ancient site, and many of the old walls of the church and religious houses around it are of great thickness. A considerable portion of the old walls which surround the whole settlement still remain intact, and stories are told of the miraculous powers attributed to them. This monastery, as the massive character of the ancient walls indicates, must have served

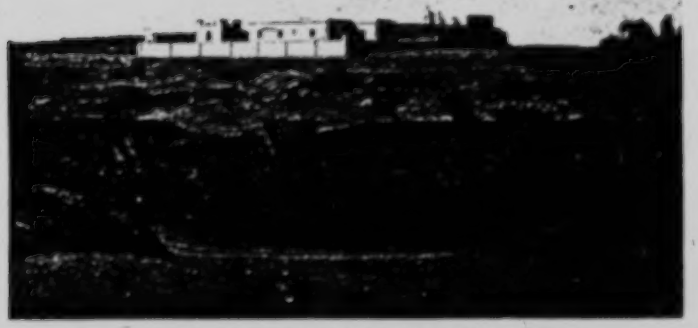


FIG. 146. A MONASTERY DEDICATED TO ST GEORGE

as a stronghold for the Christians, who built it when religious wars raged between them and the Muslims. One or two pillars preserved in the more modern church are, so I was told, relics from an ancient building which has perished.

The annual festival held here in honour of St George attracts a great number of people, who flock to the monastery from considerable distances. It is interesting to observe that the crowds which congregate within the monastery precincts are composed of quite as many Muslims as Christians. Except for the fact that there was no *zikr*, the proceedings were much the same as those of the Muslim festivals described above. The same trading went on, and similar musical and other entertainments were provided. This *mūlid* continues for a week, and during the last few days horse-racing and displays of fancy riding take place. Many of the visitors

178 But we must at all costs avoid here even the appearance
121 of determinism. The fellah is no more the product of the Egyptian countryside than the countryside is the product of the fellah. There is no question here of inevitability, or any determining influence. Man is free, and this freedom is to be defined as "the power of self-determination".

Man is free, and cultivation remains contingent on his will. There are infinite possibilities, among which the will of man — not of the fellah, but of his master — chooses this or that, according to circumstances. At one time, the vine was grown on Egyptian soil. Grapes make wine, and the
241 veto of the Koran killed the vineyards. Not long ago, vast
249 areas were planted with tobacco, but the Government has now forbidden this. Maize of American origin, and cotton, introduced in the nineteenth century, are now chief among the crops. Tomorrow some new crop may cover the fields. No law of necessity, whether of climate or soil, determines once and for all the agriculture of Egypt; much less, then, human life. At the same time the climate and vegetation of Egypt exert a characteristic influence on those who live in, and on, the country.

181 In the case of the town-dwellers and industrial workers,
183 the bond between nature and man is looser; the impress
132 of the physical environment is softened and neutralised by the
133 stronger social, civic and political influences. This makes these classes less stable, but more progressive.
121

The countryman, on the other hand, is moulded directly by the soil. Febvre justly criticises the generalisations of Ratzel and Brunhes on the influence of physical environment (*); but without granting their theories anything like universal applicability we may recognise that they do apply sufficiently to agricultural communities, and especially to the Egyptian fellaheen.

It will become clear, indeed, that the monotony, uniformity and productiveness of the Nile Valley have their exact counterpart in the characteristics of the fellah community. These two are not parallel but correlative. They meet and crystallise in a distinct manner of life, which is at once a geographical and a social phenomenon. It will also become clear that the water and mud of the Nile enter into and in great part explain the whole life of the fellah, his work and his home, his body and his soul, and impart

to him both their qualities and their defects. It is because the fellah 'buries' himself in this mud that it has become so fertile. Egypt, gift of the Nile, is no less a gift of the fellah. It is because this soil has incarnated itself in the fellah that he himself is so enduring, but also so material, so stagnant. 181 183 132 133 121

Progress then must come from some form of release, of emergence, from education in the original sense of drawing out potentialities. The true duty of society is to liberate the fellah's spirit from its stifling envelope of mud; to free him from the defects of the soil, while leaving him its good qualities. The initiative can never come from his own community, which is completely numbed and powerless, but only from the classes which overshadow him, from the *élite*, who with their riches of mind and money can vitalise him. In this dough must work the leaven of intelligence and sympathy.

The following chapters will illustrate in detail these general remarks, and bring us by the logic of facts to the human conclusion which we have here outlined.

3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Egypt MR 1

CHAPTER II

# THE PHYSICAL BACKGROUND

## EGYPT AN AGRICULTURAL COUNTRY

### 1. – Geography

E 177 565 241 There has been much talk of the industrialisation of Egypt. The progress of the last five years is as widespread as it has been rapid. An industrial proletariat has emerged, a native working class, which is worthy of study. But the absence of iron and coal mines has prevented this country from becoming, properly speaking, an industrial centre, and even from being able to satisfy the needs of its own population in manufactured goods. It is and will be for some time to come primarily an agricultural country. This results from its physical structure (¹).

E F 133 134 By reason of its flat surface, its rich, damp loam, its fertilising river, and its warm, dry climate, Egypt is geographically suited for wide and intensive cultivation, and its soil can bear crop after crop without failing.

Were it not for the fertilising Nile, the one artery of life which flows across this desert area of Africa, Egypt, like her neighbours Arabia and Libya, would be little more than a vast expanse of sand, granite, and limestone, in itself useless for either agriculture or industry, — a poverty-stricken land of nomads and shepherds.

Though the Nile has its source outside the land of Egypt, it is to Egypt that its fullness belongs. It enters her boundaries after a journey of 3,000 miles with a rich load of silt drawn from the most varied types of soil. It renews itself year after year, and its rise and fall is the pulse of Egypt's life.

The silt, brought from the south and carried down on the flood, has been deposited by the Nile in alluvial strata,

since the last phase of the quaternary period, over the flat edges of its bed, and spread out in ever widening layers across its mouth, encroaching on the sea (¹).

These deposits have created on top of the granite, limestone or sand a layer of black earth, varying in depth between 10 to 30 metres in different regions.

The Nile soil which thus covers the valley consists of both coarse and colloidal clay, with an admixture of various salts. It is an amalgam of finely ground particles carried down by the Blue and White Niles. The composition of this arable soil, unlike that of most agricultural countries, is substantially the same everywhere. It has a high mineral content, which, as we shall see later, has an important influence on the food of the fellah.

This soil, once deposited, is continually irrigated and enriched by the Nile, by means of either flooding or canalisation, but always under the control of man. The time-honoured system of basin irrigation, still in use over a million feddans, consists in discharging the water at flood-time through small channels on to *hôds* — vast areas of land surrounded by dykes. The land absorbs water until it is saturated; then the remainder slowly drains away, after depositing a layer of the fine silt with which the water was laden before flowing into the basins. Each feddan thus receives about 7,000 cubic metres of water, which leave 8 or 9 tons of silt. Immediately after the water is drained off (about November) the crops are sown. They are then left to ripen until harvest-time without needing any further irrigation. The land then lies fallow till the next flood. However, many of those who farm basin land, in order to produce a summer as well as a winter crop, make use of the underground water by means of pumps, which are now so common that they have modified the system of cultivation in these districts.

The perennial system of irrigation, introduced in 1840, and made possible through engineering works, of which the most notable is the Aswan Dam, now covers all the Delta and the greater part of Upper Egypt (4,300,000 feddans). The Nile no longer completely floods the land. Its water is stored in reservoirs, then distributed through barrages into a network of canals which water the land throughout the year.

241 132 Thus at High Nile (August to October) the fields are no longer flooded, but only irrigated, and bear the crops called *nili*. When the flood is over, and the level of the flood is falling (November to April), the land, being still moist, receives sufficient water for the winter crop (*shetwi*). At Low Nile (April to July) the reservoirs are gradually emptied to provide water for ripening a third crop, called the summer crop (*sêfi*).

132 134 To be fruitful, the land needs not only water, but also air. The sun, by the vertical cracks its summer heat makes in the level soil, plays its part in reviving the fallow land. It removes excess salt and mellows the soil by letting the air penetrate deeply into the earth, so that the land is dehydrated and renewed (¹).

We thus see the Nile, helped by the sun, already at work preparing and cultivating the land, and so determining the fellah's physical environment, the living Egypt.

133 In fact, wherever the Nile does not penetrate, either from above or below, the desert begins abruptly, without any intermediate zone. The conventional colourings of maps, which show Egypt as a thin green strip across a great dun-coloured space, correspond exactly with reality. From the top of the Great Pyramid near Cairo, or from the hills of the Sa'îd (²), one is struck, whichever way one looks, by the clear line of demarcation where human labour and habitation stop short. Between the cliffs of the Libyan and Arabian deserts lies a level valley, 650 miles in length. Its width is less than a mile at Wadi-Halfa (³), 3 miles at Edfu, about 8 between Luxor and Assiut, where it narrows again, and 15 at Beni-Suef, whence a branch goes off westward to the Fayûm. From Cairo it spreads out fanwise to form a coast-line of 160 miles at the north of the Delta. In all there are some 12,000 square miles of good land, lying in the midst of about 400,000 square miles of barren sand. This 3% of the whole area represents the living and productive Egypt.

Its shape is given to it by the Nile. It looks like a giant lotus, whose roots, the White and the Blue Nile, are planted in the heart of Africa, in the high mountains of Abyssinia and the great lakes of the Congo. From Khartoum the sap rises along a single stem, which pushes into Egypt at Wadi-Halfa, shows signs of green at Aswan, bears a single leaf

(the Fayûm) near Beni-Suef, flowers at Cairo, and spreads out into a great head of blossom on the Rosetta and Damietta branches, till it touches the Mediterranean across a fringe of lakes — Mariut, Edku, Borollos and Manzala — stretching from West to East across the mouths of the river. 133

Closed in by its two deserts, far across which lie the political frontiers, the Nile Valley is of an essentially agricultural nature. Its life has but one colour, the green of perpetual crops. They spread over a vast, unvarying countryside, sprinkled here and there with towns and villages. 133 137

A man standing in a maize field at harvest time can see neither the Nile, nor the vast network of canals and drains, nor the low clusters of houses, and is able to trace the railway line only by the telegraph poles. As on the well-watered plains of Holland and Russia — though under a rainless sky — the fields and crops are all in all. 133 241

A traveller in the Valley of the Nile cannot fail to be impressed by the agricultural nature of the whole countryside. Whether he goes north from Cairo to Alexandria, or south towards Khartoum, whether he travels by rail, road or river, in the Delta or in the Sa'id, in summer or in winter, his impression will be the same. But once he leaves the Nile on the way to Suez, or to the Coptic monasteries of Wadi-Natroun, the desert engulfs him on every side. He seems in a different country. On the West he will find the oases of Kharga, Dakhla, Farafra and Siwa, with their Bedouin and their bazaars. On the East, towards the Red Sea coast, he will meet with oil-wells and phosphate mines, and the families of Upper Egyptian fellaheen who have gone to work there. In this strange, denuded Egypt, which is neither Upper nor Lower Egypt, there are only these uprooted exiles to remind the traveller of the familiar countryside which for him, as for nine tenths of the Egyptians themselves, is the land of Egypt. [166 464]

2.— Ethnology.

Neither the water nor the silt of the Nile, however, nor the burning rays of the sun could have created, or maintained until today, the agricultural land of Egypt, without the aid of a population itself fundamentally agricultural. 162 241

we shall probably be rather under- than overstating the case if we reckon the agricultural population, which is the subject of our enquiries, at twelve million souls.

Moreover, this population is increasing. Less rapidly, it is true, than that of Cairo, where between 1917 and 1927 the increase was 28%, while in the country it scarcely exceeded 10%. But in the city the rise is largely due to an influx from abroad and from the countryside; in the country it is dependent on the birthrate alone.

Thus the rural density of population is about 1300 persons to the square mile (1). Such a situation is probably without parallel except in Tonkin, where six million peasants live on 5150 square miles, giving a density of 1165, or 93% of the population on 16% of the territory. Of this mass three millions live at a density of 1400, and more than one and a half millions at 2800 (2).

The density of population in the Nile Valley is explained by the concurrence of all the conditions, geographic, economic and social, which favour a high birthrate. The climate is warm, the valley itself is flat, uniform, tractable and strictly defined. There are plentiful food crops which can provide locally for a numerous population; maize, corn, rice, lentils and beans grow throughout the country.

The cultivation of cotton necessitates a settled concentration of workers, whose labour may bring considerable profit. The perennial irrigation system on the one hand requires many labourers, and on the other hand, by raising the productivity of the soil, makes it possible for more people to live on it. The soil is divided into many small properties, either rented or privately owned. These small holdings only accentuate the overcrowding which causes them. Help is wanted as cheap as possible; children can provide it. Thus the fellah is forced by the exigencies of the land to have children, and as many as possible. This for him is the meaning of marriage and the family. Where all these conditions exist together, as in the province of Menoufiya in the Upper Delta, where the land has been longest cultivated and irrigated, where cotton is the chief crop and small holdings are the most numerous, a density of over 2,000 to the square mile is to be found (3).

Where favourable conditions are fewer the density grows less. This is so in the South, in the districts above

## Chapter VI

# THE VILLAGE AND THE PEASANT COMMUNITY

571 The fellah should always be spoken of in the plural, because he lives always as a member of a group, if not of a crowd. In the fields, as tenant or owner, he works with his wife and children; as a hired labourer, he works in a gang, swinging the *fass* or sowing seed in a concerted rhythm.

Limited as the fellah's horizon may be within the village, he works in the open air and in public more often than in the privacy of his house. The women go in groups to draw water, the children play in swarms, daily life is collective and communal. But to understand the village community, it is necessary first of all to look at the village.

361 137 Seen from outside, as it stands up in the middle of the plain or against the pale background of the desert cliffs, it is a huddled earthy mass, compact but shapeless, and crowned with bundles of brushwood. A whitewashed building, more important than the rest — perhaps a great pigeon-cote or the house of a notable — stands out from the confusion. Palms or acacias, sycamores or *lebbekhs* rise above the mass and relieve its drabness. In the bright light of Egypt these grouped or scattered trees around or in amongst the houses give a fine effect, and Brunhes has devoted a whole page to the picture in his *Géographie Humaine*. It is not for us to imitate him. We must pierce behind this magic veil, which is all that most observers can see, and probe the reality.

361 133 As the villages date from before the period of flood-control, few of them are actually on the Nile banks. Most stand back, at distances from a hundred yards to half a mile away. Others straggle along the edge of the Upper Egyptian desert, or stand huddled on a *kôm or tell*, that is to say the ruins of an ancient village or an artificial mound or dyke. In districts where the Nile flood is no longer to

be feared. the village may stand on the level of the fields, barely visible, though always very compact.

A village may be situated anywhere. There is always water near, the soil and the contour of the land scarcely vary, so that the geographer cannot lay down hard and fast rules in explanation. History might have something to say on the subject, but who will ever know the past of those four thousand villages scattered far and wide along the Nile Valley? Their congestion, however, can be explained.

Not a square inch of ground must be wasted, especially if it is rich and well watered. In order to keep the cultivated area as large as possible, the unproductive space covered by human dwellings is reduced to a minimum. As we have seen, up to the nineteenth century the land and its cultivators belonged to the State and a few big landowners. The fellaheen had no interest in living on isolated farmsteads, all the more so because in that troubled period plundering Arabs or highway robbers would soon have despoiled them.

Moreover the village was the official unit for taxes, recruiting, judicial enquiries and the survey, so that it was essential for the villagers to remain within it. For these reasons, which still hold good today, the Government would not allow them to settle outside the village area.

These motives are now reinforced by certain new factors, such as the increase of population, the high price of land, and lack of space. The 1907 survey fixed the boundaries of the village areas once and for all.

A village may contain anything from a few hundred to several thousand inhabitants — 15,000 is not an uncommon figure — but it will always seem no more than one large family. Nothing is more like one Egyptian village than another Egyptian village. Here is another example of the monotonous uniformity which we have so often had cause to mention. There is a difference between the villages of Upper and Lower Egypt, as there is between the fellaheen of the two regions, but the likeness between them is far more striking. If an Egyptian of the older generation is shown photographs of several villages and asked whether they belong to Upper Egypt or the Delta, he will frequently give the wrong answer.

This is because the same kind of people and the same manner of life make for the same sort of villages. When

## PEASANT FUNERALS

764
133
291

*Men and Women*

## A PEASEANT FAMILY

515
585
292
352
231
415

*A head toilet.*

*The wedding procession*

3: Ayrout M-5 (ca. 1935) 1945
MR13 Fellahin MR13



311
474
291
133

*Digging ditches*

248
133

*Putting the harvested cotton into sacks*

Page 160 (D)

5. *T.*—Iron ore of excellent quality and in great abundance has recently been discovered in the Western Desert near Aswan; the projected electrification of the Aswan Dam would provide power for smelting it on the spot. The author's original text, which excluded the possibility of far-reaching industrialisation, has accordingly been modified. [113] [135]

6. P. Bovier Lapierre : L'Egypte Préhistorique in Précis d'Histoire d'Egypte, Vol. I, pp. 9-14.

7. Mosséri and Audebeau : The Function of Cracks in the Soil in the Drying and Permanent Purification of the Land in Egypt, in Bulletin de l'Institut d'Egypte, Vol. V (1922-3), pp. 9-19.
A. Demanféon ; Problèmes Actuels et Aspects Nouveaux de la Vie Rurale en Egypte, in Annales de Géographie, Paris, March 1926, pp. 155-173.

8. 'The word sa'id signifies a raised area of land. The same word also means the surface of the soil, good earth, any good area of land. It was applied by the Arabs in the time of Islam to the southern part of Egypt, because this part is raised above the rest of Egypt. The sa'id is also known by the name of the Southern Region.' Maqrizi : Topographical and Historical Description of Egypt (14th Century). [133] [134] [103]

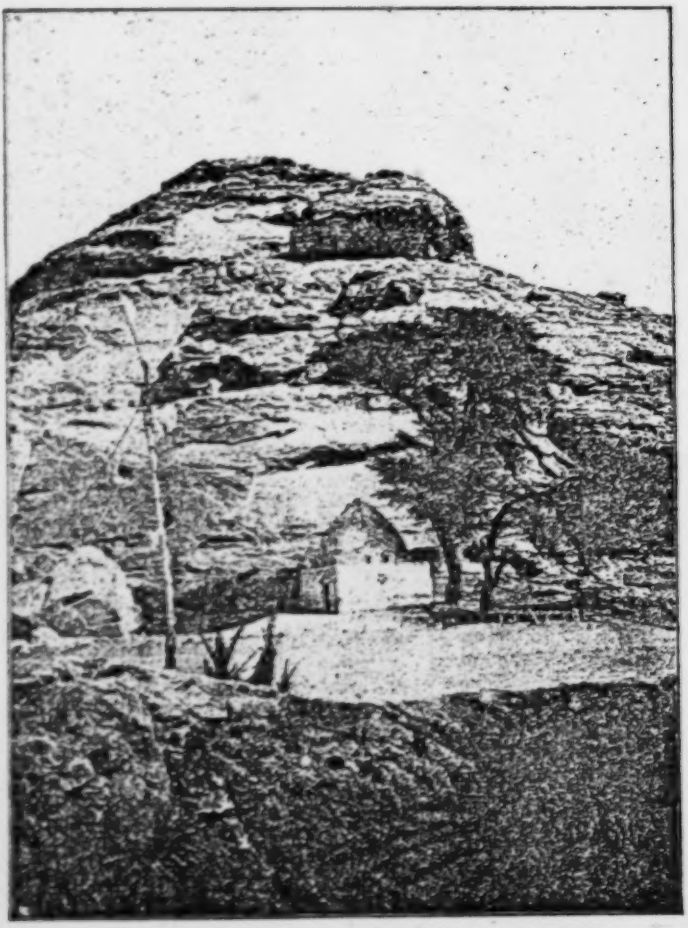
9. De Morgan : Recherches sur les Origines de l'Egypte, Vol. I, p. 67.

10. A. Moret : The Nile and Egyptian Civilisation, p. 468. 'On the numbers of the population in Pharaonic times the monuments tell us nothing definite. By analogy with modern times one may reckon that Egypt, properly so called, was able to feed eight million inhabitants under the Theban Monarchy.' [161]
Prince Omar Toussoun, in his Mémoires sur les Finances de l'Égypte depuis les Pharaons jusqu'à nos jours, reckons the number at eighteen millions.

11. 'Suffice it to say that a village which once contained 10,000 souls seemed to the passer-by nothing but a rubbish-heap ; sometimes a few solitary people were to [162]

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

133
346
766



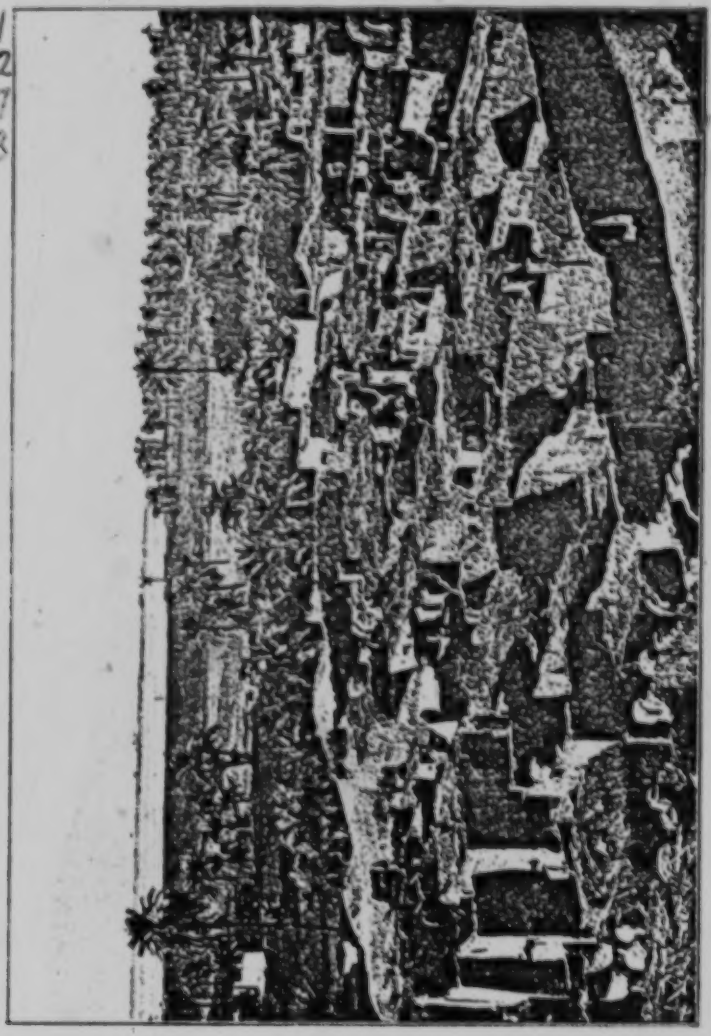
Photograph by Freiherr von Gruenau.

**Grave of a Saint.**
(at Elleslye in Nubia.)

[P.3]

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

361
342
137
133



The Village of Edfu in Upper Egypt.

8:Schaefer A-5 (1900-1901) 1904
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt

## Invitations.

### 113.

The girl makes pretense of showing her lover one of the sand-banks which emerge from the Nile, suffer many changes and disappear, according to the season of the year. Here, of course, it is only a cloak (Maḥmûd).

*Ya tara, ya ḥabîbi,*
*kuntē fēn el-yōm?*
*ša'rak mesabsab,*
*we-'ēnak sable lin-nōm.*
*Iṭla' bina 'aṣr 'ali,*
*ninām we-nišba' nōm.*
*wafarragak 'ala-l-gezīre,*
*illi-tnašet el-yōm.*

Where, my beloved,
Hast thou been today?
Thy hair hangs on thy brow
And thine eye is heavy with sleep.
Let us mount a lofty house
And sleep till we are sated with sleep.
And I will show thee the island
Which has formed itself today.

3. Literally: hangs straight down.

5. 'aṣr, literally: castle, designates a solidly built structure with an upper story. Even a house such as the middle class in the cities possess, is, in the country beside the miserable peasant-huts, designated as 'aṣr, "castle" (Vollers).